

Marta Makara-Studzińska, Agata Madej

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## Hope for success and styles of coping with stressful situations of women aged 25–35 experiencing domestic violence in marriage

Nadzieja na sukces a style radzenia sobie w sytuacjach stresowych kobiet w wieku 25–35 lat doświadczających przemocy w małżeństwie

Department of Applied Psychology, Medical University of Lublin, Poland

Correspondence: Agata Madej, Zakład Psychologii Stosowanej, Uniwersytet Medyczny w Lublinie, ul. Chodźki 15, 20-093 Lublin, Polska, tel.: +48 664 125 265, e-mail: madej\_agata@interia.pl

### Abstract

**Introduction:** The case of violence against women is an up-to-date topic much publicized in the society. Police data confirm that the number of home interventions increases by the year, with women as the main group of victims of violent behaviour. A number of questions, therefore, arise, inter alia: how do women cope with the difficulties they face, and how do they evaluate their chances for the improvement of their life situation? The aim of the study is to show the styles of coping with stressful situations and the level of hope for the success of women experiencing violence in their marriage. **Material and methods:** The study covered two groups of women aged 25–35. The research tool was Hope for Success Questionnaire and Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations. The results were subject to statistical analysis. **Results:** Women experiencing violence in marriage received significantly lower scores on the task-oriented style scale. The same group of women is characterised by significantly higher results obtained on the emotion-oriented style scale. There was no statistically significant difference between the groups in terms of the avoidance-oriented style scale. The analysis of the results obtained in the Hope for Success Questionnaire shows that women abused by their husbands do not exhibit much hope for success. **Conclusions:** Women experiencing violence in marriage apply the emotion-oriented style, whereas women free from violence – the task-oriented style. Both groups surveyed apply the avoidance-oriented style in the same degree. Women abused by their husbands do not achieve high results as far as hope for success is concerned.

**Key words:** violence, marriage, hope, stress

### Streszczenie

**Wstęp:** Problem stosowania przemocy wobec kobiet jest obecnie bardzo aktualny i nagłaśniany w społeczeństwie. Dane policyjne potwierdzają, iż z roku na rok wzrasta liczba interwencji domowych, w których najczęstszymi ofiarami zachowań o charakterze przemocowym są kobiety. W związku z tym pojawia się szereg pytań, między innymi: w jaki sposób kobiety radzą sobie z napotykanymi trudnościami oraz jak oceniają szansę na poprawę swojej sytuacji życiowej? Celem niniejszego badania jest ukazanie stylów radzenia sobie w sytuacjach stresowych oraz poziomu nadziei na sukces kobiet doświadczających przemocy w małżeństwie. **Materiał i metody:** W badaniu wzięły udział dwie grupy kobiet w wieku 25–35 lat. Narzędzia badawcze stanowiły Hope for Success Questionnaire oraz Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations. Uzyskane wyniki badań poddano analizie statystycznej. **Wyniki:** Kobiety doświadczające przemocy w małżeństwie uzyskały istotnie niższe wyniki w skali *the task-oriented style*. Grupa tych samych kobiet charakteryzuje się znacznie wyższymi wynikami uzyskanymi w skali *the emotion-oriented style*. Nie stwierdzono istotnej statystycznie różnicy między badanymi grupami w zakresie *the avoiding-oriented style*. Analizując wartości otrzymane w Hope for Success Questionnaire, można stwierdzić, że kobiety maltretowane przez mężów nie mają zbyt wielkiej nadziei na odniesienie sukcesu. **Wnioski:** Kobiety doświadczające przemocy w małżeństwie stosują styl skoncentrowany na emocjach, kobiety bez przemocy – styl skoncentrowany na zadaniu. Obydwie grupy równie często stosują styl skoncentrowany na unikaniu. Kobiety maltretowane przez mężów nie osiągają wysokich wyników w zakresie nadziei na sukces.

**Słowa kluczowe:** przemoc, małżeństwo, nadzieja, stres

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past four decades, the issue of violence against women, commonly considered a taboo, a “private matter,” has become a social issue vigorously discussed in political, public, legal, medical and scientific aspects (Makara-Studzińska, 2014). World Health Organization defines violence as the intentional use of physical force that results in injury, damage, death, psychological pain, abnormal development or deprivation (Valpied and Hegarty, 2015). Güleç Öyekçin *et al.* (2012), on the basis of the results of research conducted in a group of 306 women, determined that 54.5% of them had experienced psychological violence, 30.4% – physical violence, 19.3% – economic violence, and 6.3% – sexual violence.

Violence between partners in a relationship is present at the time of their engagement, and 80% of its occurrence is in the first four years of living together (Makara-Studzińska *et al.*, 2005). In a marriage where violence occurs, the abused woman is exposed to endless, sometimes extreme stress. The woman is not able to apply previously known strategies in an efficient manner, and the subsequent acts of violence leave traumatic traces in her psyche. Experiencing violence is related to the development of mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, addiction, contact disorders, eating disorders, self-harm, and persistent suicidal tendencies (Karakurt *et al.*, 2013; Sprague and Olff, 2014). The factors increasing the risk of violence in a relationship are as follows: young age, a reason for getting married, addiction to alcohol, violence in the partner’s family, low economic status (Capaldi *et al.*, 2012; Rennison *et al.*, 2013).

The starting point for the discussion is the concept of hope for success by Snyder and the typology of styles of coping with stressful situations by Endler and Parker.

Endler and Parker proposed three styles of coping with stress:

- the task-oriented style (TOS) – the person, through cognitive transformation or attempt at changing the situation, is trying to take active action to address the problem;
- the emotion-oriented style (EOS) – the tendency to focus on self, on the emotional experiences; fantasy and wishful thinking which are used to reduce the experienced emotional tension;
- the avoidance-oriented style (AOS) – taking actions that help the victim avoid thinking about a stressful situation; this style is passive and covers two forms: engaging in displacement activities and the search for social contacts (Mroczkowska and Białkowska, 2014; Sygit-Kowalkowska, 2014).

According to Snyder, hope is a positive state of motivation based on interactive goal-oriented actions and strategies leading to these goals (Krok, 2013; Kwiatek, 2012). Hope is based on two types of beliefs:

- a person, as a performer of an action, has the skill that will help achieve the stated goals; this component is known as strong will;

- the ability to arrive at solutions – perceiving oneself as having sufficient knowledge and the ability to find many effective ways towards reaching the goals set by oneself.

Hope for success refers to the expectation strength of the positive effects of own actions (Łaguna *et al.*, 2005). The author emphasizes the important role of the thinking process. It is accompanied by a given action of the person, as well as a particular situation when the person makes the decision. The entity acquires a set of stable beliefs in childhood, which is shaped as experience is gained. Understood in this way, hope occurs in the face of certain situations, taking the form of such a pattern of thinking that influences the interpretation of events and the assessment of the chances for successful action undertaken by the individual. In a study conducted in a group of 204 people, Krok (2013) found the hope for success to be positively associated with emotional and cognitive dimensions of psychological well-being. Hope facilitates the achievement of goals, undertaking effective action, and mental functioning in everyday situations. People with a high level of hope for success are happier and more satisfied with achieving their goal sets. They are also in an optimistic mood more frequently, and their positive emotions are stronger.

The battered woman syndrome is mentioned as one of the consequences of experiencing violence. Typically, the symptoms include emotional paralysis (numbness), denial (avoidance), depression, reduction in the level of interest in the surrounding world; re-experiencing unpleasant events in memories and dreams; hyperactivity in the form of sleep disorders and appetite, anxiety, irritability and a tendency to cry. Walker (1979) also mentions the low level of self-esteem, acquired helplessness, and withdrawal from maintaining social contacts. According to this author, the battered woman syndrome consists of two phases: 1) active or passive rebellion associated with escape or active defence against the perpetrator of violence; 2) a situation in which a woman finds out that her efforts do not produce any results, accompanied by a sense of helplessness, coupled with symptoms of depression. Many studies have shown abused women to be unable to effectively solve encountered problems. In every situation, they find a lesser number of solutions, as well as in the case of having the possibility to act they choose a less effective solution as compared with women who do not experience violence from their spouse. The fear accumulating when experiencing violent behaviour reduces a woman’s ability to think clearly in the future. Victims of violence may display self-destructive behaviour (in the form of drug use, alcohol, self-mutilation, suicide attempts). Abused women rarely express their anger openly, as disclosure would entail punishment from the perpetrator. The study presents issues related to intra-marital violence. All violence-related behaviours have an impact on a woman’s functioning in her daily life: reacting in the face of stressful and difficult situations, conviction of being able to solve any problems encountered, and having strong will.

Due to the extensive nature of the topic, we posed two major research questions:

1. Do women aged 25–35 experiencing marital violence differ in terms of the level of hope for success from women aged 25–35 years who have not experienced this violence?
2. Do the styles of coping with stress differ between the two groups of women?

In the course of our research, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

1. The level of hope for success in women aged 25–35 experiencing violence in marriage is different from the level that occurs in women of the same age who do not experience violence.
2. There are differences in the styles of coping with stress among women aged 25–35 experiencing violence in marriage and women of the same age without such experience:
  - women aged 25–35 experiencing violence in marriage prefer the style focused on emotions at the expense of style focused on the task, compared to women of the same age without the experience of violence from their spouse;
  - women aged 25–35 experiencing violence in marriage prefer the style focused on avoidance (and are thus more likely to engage in substitute activities at the expense of seeking social contacts) compared to women of the same age who do not experience marital violence.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study covered 60 women aged 25–35 years from Lublin Province. The experimental group ( $n = 30$ ) comprised women experiencing violence from their current or former spouse; 25 of them regularly seek help from the psychologist based at the Counselling and Information Office for the Victims of Domestic Violence, located at the “Iskra” Teetotaller Club in Biłgoraj (Lublin Province). The control group ( $n = 30$ ) were women of the same age, who had no experience of marital violence. All women were informed about the purpose and the principles of the study, and asked to complete two questionnaires, which were voluntary and anonymous. A total number of 120 questionnaires were obtained. The research tools were the Hope for Success Questionnaire (HSQ) and Coping Inventory for Stressful

Situations (CISS). HSQ, whose authors are Łaguna, Zięba and Trzebiński, consists of 12 statements. The result is the sum of points, which determines the overall level of hope for success. Within its scale, measurement of two components can be performed: the strength of will and the ability to find solutions (Łaguna *et al.*, 2005). CISS, created by Endler and Parker, comprises 48 statements. They involve different behaviours that are displayed by people in the event of a stressful situation. The comparison of the sten values thus obtained allows the identification of the dominant style of coping with stressful situations by the subjects (Strelau *et al.*, 2005).

The statistical analysis was performed using the SPSS software (version 14). We used Student's *t*-test and Mann–Whitney *U* test for variables with different distributions. Pearson coefficient and Spearman rank correlation were utilized to examine the relationship. The level of significance was established at  $p < 0.05$ , which indicates the existence of statistically significant differences and dependencies.

## RESULTS

Tab. 1 presents a comparative analysis of the HSQ scales in the experimental and the control groups. We can assume that the differences between women experiencing violence in marriage and women free from marital violence in terms of SW (the strength of will), AFS (the ability to find solutions), and OS (overall score) scales are statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). Women from the experimental group received significantly lower scores on the SW scale ( $t = 12.71$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) than women in the control group. This reflects the fact that women experiencing marital violence are less convinced about having a strong will enable to take effective action in comparison with women who have had no experience of marital violence. The difference arises in the case of the AFS scale, in which victims of violence obtained significantly lower scores ( $U = 74.50$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This shows that women experiencing violence in marriage are much less confident about solving their difficult situations than women with no experience of domestic violence.

The results described above affect the scores obtained in the OS scale ( $U = 7.00$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), where the differences

HSQ	E ( <i>n</i> = 30)		C ( <i>n</i> = 30)				
Student's <i>t</i> -test							
SW	<i>x</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	15.76	2.99	25.83	3.14	12.71	58	0.001
Mann–Whitney <i>U</i> test							
OS	<i>x</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>x</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>U</i>		<i>p</i>
	36.43	5.72	51.96	5.10	7.00		0.001
AFS	20.66	3.54	26.13	2.58	74.50		0.001

Tab. 1. Comparative analysis of the HSQ scale in the experimental (E) and control (C) group – statistics for the scale characterised and not characterised by normal distribution results

between the groups are also statistically significant. It transpires that women abused by their husbands do not have much hope for success compared with those women who lead a happy married life.

The analysis of the results obtained by the respondents on the CISS scale (Tab. 2) reveals differences between the experimental group and the control in the TOS and EOS scales to be statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). On the other hand, there are no differences in the AOS scale and its subscales, EDA (engagement in displacement activities) and SSC (searching for social contacts). Women in the experimental group received significantly lower scores in the TOS scale than women from the control group ( $t = 9.25$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Women who have had no contact with violence in marriage far more often apply the TOS as compared to the victims of violence. The group of respondents that experienced violent behaviour is characterised by significantly higher results obtained in the EOS scale ( $t = -6.43$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This means that women experiencing partner violence more often choose the EOS than those who have not experienced violence.

Both groups of participants apply the AOS and its subscales (EDA and SSC) to the same degree.

Analysing the data in Tab. 3, we can conclude that in the group of women abused by their husbands certain HSQ and CISS scales are correlated. The higher the confidence of having a strong will, the more the person has developed a mechanism of task-oriented coping in the event of stress ( $r = 0.46$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and their emotions have a lower impact on coping with a difficult situation ( $r = -0.37$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The more women experiencing violence in marriage seek contact with other people, the more skillfully they are able to find solutions to the difficulties ( $\rho = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and thus have more hope for the success of the actions they take ( $\rho = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The level of hope can be reduced when emotions override the ability to cope with problems ( $\rho = -0.37$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Importantly, TOS applied as the dominant coping style correlates positively with the effectiveness of finding solutions to difficult situations ( $\rho = 0.40$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and with hope for success ( $\rho = 0.48$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) in the victims of violence.

Considering the juxtaposition, it is clear that among women who are not victims to marital violence there is a relationship between the EOS and HSQ scales. Apparently, the higher the confidence of having a strong will, the smaller the influence of emotions on dealing with stress ( $r = -0.39$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, the greater the impact of emotions to deal with stressful situations, the lower the efficiency of solving them ( $\rho = -0.44$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The EOS negatively correlates with having hope for success ( $\rho = -0.52$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) in women. The same trend occurs in the case of women with experience of marital violence.

## DISCUSSION

In the course of the conducted research, significant differences in the styles of coping with stress among women-victims of marital violence and women without experience of violence have been determined. Women abused in marriage mainly focused on their own emotions in the face of a difficult situation. Women with no experience of violence frequently applied the style focused on the task. Both groups equally often used the style focused on avoidance (including the same frequency of seeking social contacts and engaging in substitute activities). Women who experienced violence in marriage have a lower conviction about having strong will and the ability to find solutions in difficult situations. As a result, they do not have high hope for success. Violence is a trigger situation that instantly evokes an emotional response and turns off one's thinking (Filek, 2010). The results presented in this paper, as well as those obtained by Terelak and Kluczyńska (2007), have shown that women with no experience of violence significantly more often applied the task-oriented coping style, while victims of violence often applied the emotion-oriented style. These women tend to focus on themselves, on their experiences, wishful thinking and emotional detachment from the stressful situation. Lokhmatkina *et al.* (2015), on the other hand, showed patients experiencing partner violence in a relationship to apply the task-oriented and the emotion-oriented styles as frequently as women who did not experience any violence.

CISS	E (n = 30)		C (n = 30)				
Student's t-test							
TOS	<i>x</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>x</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	52.60	6.15	65.50	4.51	9.25	58	0.001
EOS	60.56	9.46	45.63	8.47	−6.43	58	0.001
AOS	44.93	9.11	44.83	8.65	−0.44	58	0.96
EDA	20.66	5.02	20.73	5.68	0.48	58	0.96
Mann–Whitney <i>U</i> test							
SSC	<i>x</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>x</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>U</i>		<i>p</i>
	15.90	4.21	16.36	3.96	445.50		0.94

Tab. 2. Comparative analysis of the CISS scales in the experimental (E) and control (C) group – statistics for the scale characterised and not characterised by normal distribution results

Scale names	E (n = 30)	p	C (n = 30)	p
<b>Pearson's correlation</b>				
HSQ: SW * CISS: TOS	<b>0.46</b>	<b>0.01</b>	0.12	0.51
HSQ: SW * CISS: AOS	0.17	0.38	–0.28	0.12
HSQ: SW * CISS: EDA	–0.01	0.97	–0.11	0.54
HSQ: SW * CISS: EOS	<b>–0.37</b>	<b>0.04</b>	<b>–0.39</b>	<b>0.03</b>
<b>Spearman's rho correlation</b>				
CISS: AOS * HSQ: AFS	0.09	0.62	–0.30	0.10
CISS: AOS * HSQ: OS	0.09	0.61	–0.28	0.12
CISS: EDA * HSQ: AFS	–0.05	0.76	–0.23	0.21
CISS: EDA * HSQ: OS	–0.07	0.68	–0.18	0.32
CISS: EOS * HSQ: AFS	–0.35	0.06	<b>–0.44</b>	<b>0.02</b>
CISS: EOS * HSQ: OS	<b>–0.37</b>	<b>0.04</b>	<b>–0.52</b>	<b>0.01</b>
CISS: TOS * HSQ: AFS	<b>0.40</b>	<b>0.02</b>	0.24	0.19
CISS: TOS * HSQ: OS	<b>0.48</b>	<b>0.01</b>	0.19	0.30
CISS: SSC * HSQ: AFS	-----	-----	–0.27	0.13
HSQ: OS * CISS: SSC	<b>0.37</b>	<b>0.04</b>	–0.25	0.18
HSQ: SW * CISS: SSC	0.33	0.71	-----	-----
HSQ: AFS * CISS: SSC	–0.78	–0.78	-----	-----

Tab. 3. Relations between the HSQ and CISS scales for the experimental (E) and control (C) group

So far, in the literature we could find the claim that abused women apply many avoidance strategies, consenting to their current situation, trying to engage in other tasks to divert their attention and be no longer interested in the outside world. Walker (1979) even mentions withdrawal from social contacts. Researchers have claimed the victims of violence to take actions which allow them to avoid thinking about the stressful situation. The results obtained in our study, showing women who experience violence in marriage not to differ significantly with respect to the use of the avoidance-oriented style from women who live in a violence-free relationship, are surprising. Research also confirms that abused women are convinced of low effectiveness of their own actions. It is a consequence of acquired helplessness combined with a low self-esteem. It is the power of hope that affects the effectiveness of a person's activities and the way of dealing with the difficulties encountered. Victims of violence have a decreased level of hope which is related to their low self-esteem and a high level of depression. According to Herzberger (2002), intense and repetitive violence introduces the victim into a state of perceptual readiness, in which the ability to analyse anything beyond the current situation is limited.

We have our work cut out in front of us, with the current study being inconclusive. We posit further research on larger groups. Women who are not actively seeking help can also be included. Therefore, the results in terms of style focused on avoidance may alter. Also, these tests could be conducted in the same group of women before and after treatment to check if the components of treatment have proven to be effective, and which have been omitted and could be applied.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained in this study can be used to determine guidelines which would improve therapy or therapeutic action with the following elements in mind: developing skills of finding constructive and active ways of coping with difficult situations by abused women; increasing self-esteem; supporting the motivation of the subjects and helping them take steps towards a positive change; strengthening the desire to use different sources of support.

### Conflict of interest

The authors do not report any financial or personal connections with other persons or organizations which might negatively affect the content of this publication and/or claim authorship rights to this publication.

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